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ABSTRACT

This article describes an undergraduate course in creative writing offered by the Department of English at the University of Hong Kong. Most students in the course have Chinese as a native language and have received their secondary education in English. They have had extensive practice in writing English in connection with their studies. The course is offered during the last two years of a three-year degree program, and the actual writing instruction is preceded by exposure to various literary styles and by analysis of contemporary English writings. The student is allowed to concentrate on one genre or experiment with several. This paper specifically deals with prose works, and focuses on the special problems faced by the students as a result of having to write in a second language. Many of these problems are directly related to the setting, the characters and the themes that the students choose, which can be grouped into the western-oriented, the traditional Chinese-oriented, and the present-day-oriented. The language necessarily varies according to a number of factors, including age, sex, educational level, social status, and geographical origin. Students experience more problems in capturing the language of situations unfamiliar to them than with technical writing details. (CLK)

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CREATIVE WRITING IN ENGLISH: PROBLEMS FACED BY UNDERGRADUATES IN THE ENGLISH DEPARTMENT, UNIVERSITY OF HONG KONG

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'As I splashed my way back to the University through the puddles, I thought despondently: "Yes, it's all been said before. There's nothing new to be said about anything any more. There aren't even any new things to be talked about any more. We complain that people are no longer original, that they fall back on platitudes and cliches, but what else can they do? There is no place left for originality; some wise guy has already said everything possible about every possible thing before." And I plodded wearily to my creative writing class.'

This was written by one of the students who have gone through the optional course in creative writing offered by the Department of English of the University of Hong Kong. Her problem of finding something new to say is aggravated by the problem of saying it in a language which is not her own.

The course in creative writing was started in 1970. Students who choose this option are required to produce, during the course of about one and a half years, enough pieces of a sufficiently high standard to satisfy the Examiners. The option is regarded as one of eight 'papers' which the undergraduate must read to fulfil degree requirements. Students in the Arts Faculty take either eight papers in one Department or choose two areas of specialization, taking four papers in one Department and the remaining four in another. The papers are set out in the syllabuses in groups. The creative writing paper offered by the Department of English is taken in conjunction with other papers on contemporary English literature and the structure of the English language.

The creative writing paper is given in the last two years of the three-year degree course. During the first term of their second year, students and teachers meet weekly to discuss the various literary genre and to analyse samples of contemporary English writings. The students' exposure to such writings is of course ensured also by their participation in other courses, particularly those dealing with contemporary poetry, novels, and plays. In the second and third terms they start writing on their own. They may concentrate on one genre, or try their hand at a number of different ones. Their work is discussed by the whole group at weekly meetings.

In their final year each student taking the creative writing paper is assigned a tutor, who sees the student once a week or more often if necessary. He is responsible for giving criticism and advice. The student may be asked to rewrite his pieces, and make

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corrections before he finally submits them for assessment one or two months before the Final Examination in May.

Every effort has been made to give our students the opportunity of talking to practising writers. We have had visits from Angus Wilson and Iris Murdoch as well as the Canadian poet, Earl Birney and the Hong Kong writer, John Gordon Davis, author of Hold My Hand, I Am Dying. The Leverhulme Foundation made it possible for us to have N.V.M. Gonzalez as Visiting Fellow in creative writing for a period of three months. A Filipino writer in English, Professor Gonzalez's experience is particularly pertinent to our region and situation. Up to the present time a total of about thirty young men and women whose native language is Chinese have accepted the challenge to write creatively in English, and already almost two hundred short stories, poems, plays, and novels have so far been submitted for assessment by the Examiners. There is now a proposal to expand this aspect of our work, and we feel it is time we began to assess the degree of success we have achieved so far and to examine more closely some of the problems faced by our bilingual undergraduates writing in English.

Background Information

Before dealing with their work we need to describe briefly the linguistic background of the average Hong Kong undergraduate, since this has a bearing on his competence in the use of English as a medium of expression.

The population of Hong Kong is now almost five million. Of this number about 98-1/2 percent could be described as Chinese on the basis of language and place of origin. In the context of Hong Kong a person is Chinese if he or his ancestors originally came from China and if his native language is Chinese. The Chinese spoken by the great majority of the population is Cantonese, one of many Chinese dialects. It is a well known fact that while the Chinese speak a variety of dialects they all use the same written language. Chinese may be written in two styles--'Wenyan', the classical literary style, and 'Peihua', the new colloquial style made popular by the May 4 Movement of 1919. As far as lexis and grammar are concerned, 'Peihua' is based to a large extent on the Mandarin dialect, particularly on the Peking variety. When a Cantonese-speaker learns to read and write, therefore, he has to learn certain features of a dialect not his own. Although in recent times, attempts have been made to reproduce the spoken form of Cantonese, these efforts are confined to journalistic and humorous writing. In serious writing of any sort, it is impossible to reproduce Cantonese faithfully in writing. A Chinese passage read out in Cantonese sounds very different from natural Cantonese speech.

By far the greatest number of primary schools in Hong Kong teach in the medium of Chinese, with English taught as a second language. The quantity of English taught varies from school to school, as does the quality. A primary school pupil who wants to receive an academic type of education may choose to enter a Chinese Middle school in which Cantonese is used as the medium of instruction with English taught as a second language. Or he may choose to continue his education in an Anglo-Chinese school which teaches in the medium of English, with Chinese taught as an academic subject. In addition to using English as the teaching medium these schools also devote a number of hours a week to the study of the English language, and, in some schools, of English literature as well.

There are two universities in Hong Kong--the University of Hong Kong, established in 1911, in which English is the medium of instruction, and the Chinese University of Hong Kong, founded in 1963, which mainly uses Chinese. For over fifty years, until the establishment of the Chinese University, English was considered the only language suitable as the medium of instruction at University level. All entrants to the University of Hong Kong had to obtain a pass in English Language. It was only until recently that regulations were changed, and the English language requirement waived in the case of students taking certain subjects, especially in the medical, scientific or engineering fields. These students may now be admitted without a pass in English Language provided they satisfy their examiners in their respective subjects. It is now up to the various Faculties to decide on the level of competence in English they require of their prospective students.

The University only requires that all applicants for places must have 'taken the Use of English Examination', and not that they must have passed it. The Arts Faculty is the only one which still insists on a relatively high standard of proficiency in English.

Until very recently English was the only official language in Hong Kong. In 1972 Chinese was recognized as the other official language. But the controversy over the medium of instruction, especially at the secondary level, still continues. 1973 saw the publication of the Green Paper containing recommendations made by a special committee on secondary education, and recently, the White Paper setting out the government's policy concerning secondary education over the next decade was published. Among the points made one concerned the very important question of the medium of instruction used in secondary schools. The White Paper recognizes that

> 'Hong Kong, if it is to maintain its progress, will continue to need people at all levels in commerce, industry and the professions who are at home in English as well as in Chinese. For these practical reasons, the standards of Chinese and English must be maintained, and indeed, if possible, improved....'

It then goes on to say

> 'It is the Government's intention that individual school authorities should themselves decide whether the medium of instruction should be English or Chinese for any particular subject in junior secondary forms.'

The issue is far from settled, and the controversy rages on. It is outside the scope of this paper to deal with the question in depth. In any case it is not our intention in this particular paper to examine in detail the many problems inherent in a bilingual situation, nor to give our views for or against the use of a second language in education in general. In another paper[1] we have described the results of a survey conducted to find out about the language habits of Hong Kong undergraduates. A number of observations made in the present paper are based on our findings in connection with this survey. With the exception of one or two students whose native language is English, all those taking the creative writing course have been Chinese writing in a learned language. They have received their secondary education in the medium of English, and by the time they begin their writing programme with us, they have had many years of writing in English in connection with their studies.

Qualities of Creative Writing to Which Students are Introduced

It is stating the obvious when one asserts that writing is an art, and it is difficult to write well even in one's own language. We know a good writer has to have certain qualities, for example, originality, sensitivity, a sense of vision, and so on. We would like to think that at least some of our students are gifted in this way, that they do have something worthwhile to tell us. Most of them can write English which is relatively free from grammatical errors. This paper will not therefore be a complaint about the lack of creativity among our students, or a lament about their low standards of English. Instead we hope to concentrate on the special problems faced by our students solely as a result of their having to write creatively in a learned language, and to assess the degree of their success in coping with these problems. We have chosen not to deal with their poems but will concentrate on their prose works.

The themes our student have opted to work with are often universal in nature, dealing with human relationships and conflicts which may be understood by all peoples. But these themes and ideas have to be made concrete by real characters acting in a real setting. Only one or two writers have used characters and settings which are completely allegorical, where even the names of the characters reflect the qualities they stand for, e.g., Inquisitive, Awkward, and so on. Sometimes the symbolic and the concrete are mixed in varying proportions. One short story entitled Ships that Pass in the Night describes a short meeting between Christina and Christopher, two people who are real but are at the same time types to show how many of us meet once and never meet again.

As soon as the characters and setting cease to be completely symbolic and stylised, the writer must make them seem real to his readers. Among the techniques used to achieve this end are physical and psychological description, dialogue, and action.

We shall see that as far as characters and setting are concerned, apart from the purely allegorical, our students have chosen to create Chinese characters acting in a Chinese setting, or English/American characters in an English/American setting, and lastly--and these are the most numerous--Hong Kong characters in a Hong Kong setting.

Western-Oriented Themes

We shall first deal with those works which have western characters acting in a western setting. Our writers have received much of their education through the medium of English. They have had a great deal of practice writing in English, in school, and also at the university level. They may be said to be competent in the use of the language, in the sense they can express themselves fluently and without making many grammatical errors. But it is not enough to be able to construct grammatical sentences; a writer needs to know what kind of things to say in what message forms to what kinds of people in what kinds of situations. The native speaker has an intuitive knowledge about linguistic appropriateness, and knows when one variety should be used rather than another, but many of our students are not very sensitive to the differences which characterize the various styles. This is shown very clearly in their writing of dialogue.

In describing the thoughts and behaviour of the characters some of our writers show they have only a superficial acquaintance with western culture and mores. Although Hong Kong is westernized in many ways, in culture it remains largely Chinese. Only a small number of our writers have lived for even short periods abroad, and their knowledge about the west has come mostly from books and films. It is no wonder then, when their stories include English or American characters, the students are usually not very successful in making them real and individualized human beings. There are exceptions, of course. We have had a few young women who were very knowledgeable about the ways of the west, because of family and school influences or because they have actually lived abroad. Their work generally shows a competent handling of Western setting and characters. In a set of pieces collectively entitled The Wedding, one writer creates the atmosphere of the excitement and hustle preceding the church ceremony. The women are all wearing smart hats, the mother of the bride is crying, small attendants are having their hair combed--an almost cliché situation made familiar through thousands of stories in women's magazines, through television, radio and cinema. The writer takes care to attempt to reproduce different 'styles' of discourse according to speaker and situation. Parents speak coaxingly or warningly to their offspring--

> 'But you mustn't crumple your new lace shirt. Now Henry, do be a good boy!'
>
> 'Oh dear, oh dear" What shall I do with you? Won't you ever stand still?'
>
> 'All you have to do is just to carry this tray to the altar, and give the rings to Auntie Lucille and Uncle Mike. That's all. Now if you will promise to be a good boy, and do exactly what I told you to do, I'll let you go to the wedding party afterwards, O.K.?'

Ladies speak gushingly to each other about little Henry,

> 'Oh, what a darling little boy!'
>
> 'Yes, isn't he just too cute!'

The writer also strikes the right 'register' when she reproducos the speech of children.

'Hey, Billy,...I got a - a new sister.' He tried to sound casual.

'So?'

'A N-E-W sis-ter.'

'So? I got two sisters, one brother. And what's so good about sisters? They won't play leap-frog with you.'

Grown-ups talk 'baby talk' when addressing Henry's new sister,

'Yoo - hoo! baby!'

'Hey, hey! Sweetie! Here are your uncles and aunties come to see you. Now, now don't cry.'

But they change their style when addressing the baby's father,

'So here's the happy father! Congratulations, Nick!'

'Nick you lucky man! I envy you.'

In a long autobiographical piece entitled Canadian Summer another young woman recounts her summer in Canada with her Canadian fiancé. Of course, here is much more than a nodding acquaintance with western ways. Her ability to produce convincing dialogue is a tribute to her abilities as a creative writer as well as her powers of observation and of listening.

But even in some of the best of the pieces with a western setting, slips do occur, especially in the manipulation of dialogue. In The Wedding, the mother tries to bribe her child into good behaviour with the promise of plenty of food at the reception. But included in her list are one or two archaisms which strike the reader as odd--

'a big wedding cake, sweetmeats...and also dainties of every kind too.'

Rather Shakespearian than contemporary. In a story called The Encounter two modern urban young women meet on a bus after an interval of four years, and reminisce about their undergraduate days. Most of their dialogue takes cognizance of speaker and situation, but stilted expressions, suggestive of nineteenth century old ladies, creep in once or twice.

'Why bless me...' says one when she first recognizes the other.

'You haven't changed a whit.'

'Annie's doing poorly.'

'Going to Europe at this time of the year. I wouldn't relish it.'

At times, the total effect of colloquial chatter is marred by outright grammatical mistakes.

'We had such a ball of time then.'

'Never approved of getting married too soon.'

'Me too.'

In a story entitled Sunday Morning At the Breakfast Table, there is every evidence of the influence of American television, the situation comedy involving a middle class family. The minor sentences, the contractions all suggest a casual tone. But a slightly doubtful note is struck when the teenage son addresses his mother as 'Mummy.' In A Riddle the writer is obviously attempting a Pinteresque drama of non-communication. The setting is clearly western. The characters are also at breakfast but, whereas the characters in Sunday Morning At the Breakfast Table are enjoying such traditional breakfast fare as waffles and coffee, the husband in A Riddle tells the wife 'the soup is good.' In another story with an American background two typical middle class teenagers go to the refrigerator for bottles of iced tea which they drink from cups.

Because the majority of our students lack firsthand knowledge of the west, and partly because they feel they are not really a part of that world anyway, few writers have chosen to write stories with a western setting. Some have tried their hand at writing about Chinese people in a Chinese setting.

Traditional Chinese-Oriented Themes

It is interesting to note that when our course was first started, our students produced quite a number of pieces dealing with the feudal China of a bygone era, of grasping land lords, plotting concubines and ladies with bound feet. They probably felt they would benefit from their 'Chineseness' and make a favourable impression on expatriate teacher and External Examiner. We had one student whose specialty was 'quaint' pieces about 'quaint' Chinese characters, like Ah Ping, the loyal amah. That particular student was a Chinese-American, and her view of China was perhaps more like that of a westerner. But even students born and bred here have little real knowledge of the China of the past. What they do know has come from books, television, films and from what they have been told by their older relatives.

Their plots and characters are, for the most part, stereotyped, though flashes of originality can be found. There seems to be a certain degree of consensus concerning the type of dialogue appropriate to characters like Lotus Blossom and Lady Precious Stream. The most acceptable style seems to be a very formal and rather pedantic one. Take the example of the Rev. Crystal Wisdom, a Buddhist Monk from Shantung, a character created by one of our most imaginative writers so far. Crystal Wisdom is speaking to a believer seeking to assuage his conscience by offering money to the monastery.

> 'Let me tell you, Mr. Chan, you cannot get away from the image of your wife because you love her, perhaps without knowing it yourself. The world is empty. We come empty-handed and we depart empty-handed. Misfortunes are inevitable. The world is empty; no one knows the absolute, which even when present, is incomprehensible. The fire of desire consumes everything. Faith is man's chief wealth. The Dharma leads to weal. The sweetest taste is truth.'

It is of course wrong to suggest that the Chinese language used by Chinese people is the same in every situation. Different styles and registers exist in Chinese too. Unfortunately many readers find it rather 'unnatural' for Chinese characters to use a more colloquial style when they are made in creative writing to communicate with one another in English. That is why most of our student writers prefer a rather artificial type of English, without contractions or colloquialisms, which they feel help to give the language a Chinese flavour. This is particularly true when they choose to write about the China of the past.

This self-imposed restraint on the choice of language restricts to some extent their development of character. For one thing, the similarity of style makes the creation of characters identifiable by dialect or idiolect virtually impossible.

Of course our more witty students are not slow to recognize the possibilities for parody inherent in such an artificial style. One student amused Internal and External

Examiners alike with her clever parody of Han Suyin writing about her youth in war-torn China.

In the past two years, some students have chosen to write about the China of today. But many of our students, a large number of whom have never been outside Hong Kong, are no more familiar with the China of today than they are with the feudal China of yesteryear. And just as their lack of a first-hand knowledge of western ways is sometimes a hindrance to them in their writing of works with an English-American setting, their lack of familiarity with China sometimes does them disservice when they are writing about their compatriots in China. In one piece with flashbacks to life in a Chinese commune, the writer retreats into a stream-of-consciousness technique to avoid depiction of physical realities. In another story, an accountant in Hong Kong recounts his early years in Southern China, and recalls that he used to take naps in the barn amid the haystacks after the wheat had been cut.

Present-Day Oriented Themes

Many of our writers have written about Chinese people functioning in a Hong Kong society, and about their relationships within this society. The ability in English among the Hong Kong population ranges from nil to near-native fluency. The bilingual Hong Kong Chinese almost never speaks to other Chinese people entirely in English, but their conversation may be sprinkled with English terms and phrases: they speak what has been called 'Chinglish.' Although Hong Kong people do not speak in English among themselves, a number of them have the potential ability to do so.

Many of the characters in the pieces with a Hong Kong setting are university undergraduates, whose circumstances are much like those of their creators. While university students in real life rarely speak entirely in English to one another outside the classroom, we can assume that they are capable of speaking entirely in English, and sometimes do. It seems to us that the convention of writing their dialogue entirely in English is particularly easy to accept. The problem, here, is whether the writer is capable of adapting the language of his characters according to 'mode,' 'field' and 'style' of discourse, so that they speak as one would expect a group of undergraduates who are native speakers to speak. This is not always an easy task.

As we have already noted, not all our students have a secure control over English as a medium of expression, and not all of them have an awareness of language variations caused by situational factors. Thus, if the criterion is what the writer believes to be the way a group of English-speaking undergraduates would speak in similar circumstances, the right note is not always struck, and in some pieces, we find the intrusion of words, images, and structures suggestive of the translation method. In fact, of course, when a person writes in a language not his own he can never completely abandon the role of translator. He can only use his own judgment--which will be coloured by his own cultural background--in the matter of linguistic aptness.

In one story, a group of male undergraduates are engaged in conversation. The tone is serious, but colloquial. They are discussing the romance of one of their class-mates.

> 'He met her at a party, and saw her a couple of times afterwards. But he became intoxicated.'

The word 'intoxicated' in this sense is repeated a number of times in the course of the conversation. Unless we see this as the intrusion of the translation method--'intoxicated' from 陶醉 --the effect seems a little jarring. One writer devotes a section of her story to the bantering chatter of a group of male undergraduates, who address one another as 'little brother.'--'Little brother, learn from me....' 'Believe me, little brother.' This would sound odd to anyone unfamiliar with this colloquial, slightly facetious mode of address 細佬 popular in Cantonese.

In another piece two young women who have just taken their final examinations are discussing their future. Their conversation is colloquial and low-key; slang expressions are introduced. Suddenly they disagree in their attitudes to marriage, and the dialogue becomes cliché-ridden and melodramatic. The writer, consciously or unconsciously, appears to change over to the translation method.

> 'But I shall have a boundless future, a future with Charles. I shall create a great future with him. It is all very well to live alone. But don't you get pangs of loneliness? Don't you feel you are drifting, like a lone spirit without a master?'

The result of the juxtaposition of the two conventions is not altogether a happy one.

In yet another piece it is lack of familiarity with conventions of writing English dialogue which creates a minor problem. Two undergraduates are on the verge of breaking off their relationship. Their dialogue is profound to the point of obscurity. In the midst of their deadly serious conversation, the young woman says, 'I waited for them a bit 'cos the way is so long.' The writer is obviously unaware of the inappropriately 'folksy' connotative values of this isolated instance of 'eye dialect.'

In spite of lapses, generally speaking, our student writers do a fairly good job in reproducing the 'spirit' of the speech of their peers. The illusion of reality is sustained. For example, when we read what one character, a male undergraduate has to say about American youth:

> 'Wonder what these pampered American kids want from life. What the hell did they make such a fuss for? The meaning of life? Hm, poor bastards! If they can't answer a simple question like that, then, sorry man, they aren't fit to live! Take a reasonable guy like me. I don't ask a lot from life; a decent job and a fat salary.

we are aware that slang expressions and Americanisms are within his linguistic repertoire, and this seems to help sustain the illusion of reality.

Issues Involving the Background of Characters

So far we have been discussing characters whose background presupposes a proficiency in the use of English. It seems fairly valid to say that no great strain is imposed on our credibility, when they utter English profanities and slang expressions. What about the case of characters whose background suggests a lack of familiarity with the language? Whatever theories they may have about the writing of dialogue, in practice many of our student writers tend to make a distinction between those characters who have the kind of social and educational background which implies familiarity with English culture and the English language and other people whose background is more completely Chinese, as it were. There is the feeling, on the part of some writers, that the language used by those characters who are supposed to have little or no English should be closer to Chinese, that there should be an attempt to produce word for word parallels.

If he adopts this method the writer in effect becomes a translator as well. He makes his characters speak first in Chinese, and produces a more or less literal translation of what they say for the benefit of his English-speaking readers. In one piece, the dialogue of a hypocritical old Buddhist woman is in marked contrast to the idiomatic, racy speech of some undergraduates.

> 'I do not have money I can spare you. Do you think it possible for a Buddhist to lie? Buddha forbids that.'

The feeling that the language used by people relatively untouched by western influences should be different is shared by many readers, most of whom would accept this outburst from an undergraduate character--'What the hell do you think you are doing?'--but would perhaps say it sounds too 'English' and therefore 'unnatural' if the same words are spoken

by an illiterate farmer in the New Territories. Somehow it seems less jarring to have him say, 'What are you doing?' instead.

There is, of course, no consensus. Some writers--and readers--contend that the 'willing suspension of disbelief', the illusion of reality, is best brought about by having all the characters speak in the English appropriate to native speakers in similar situations. Thus, in one piece in which the setting is clearly Hong Kong, a bus-driver is made to say on a rainy day, 'Fine weather for ducks!' This may well be what a native speaker of English placed in a similar situation would say, but it is clearly not a direct translation of what a Hong Kong bus driver would say in Chinese. Still, it could be argued that the 'spirit' of his speech has been caught. Some writers feel that if the translation method is used, the result is even farther from reality because it is neither English nor Chinese. They feel that if English is to be used as the medium of communication between the different characters, it should be the sort of English which may be used by native speakers of the language in similar situations. Sociologists tell us, of course, that no two situations are exactly alike, and certainly one does not expect to find identical situations in two different cultural contexts. But there are similarities in the factors which define any particular situation. The writer, then, has to make his characters speak in the way he believes a group of English people would speak in the same or similar circumstances. After all, if we can accept the Wife of Bath and Othello speaking in verse, should we not be prepared to accept Chinese characters speaking the sort of English which is actually spoken by native speakers of the language?

But there are dangers inherent in this method of total acceptance of the convention. The English expression chosen may be too tied to a context of another time and/or of place. For example, the hero of Angry Young Man is a Hong Kong boy doomed to a life in the gutter. Every effort is made by the writer to create a sordidness peculiar to Hong Kong. A discordant note is struck when the boy answers his father's accusations of ingratitude with, 'Thanks? For bringing me up as a drudge not fit to clean the boots of a gentleman?' Dickensian echoes hardly appropriate under the circumstances. Another example comes from a story about a Hong Kong factory girl, A Day in the Life of.... The writer tries hard to evoke the atmosphere of a tiny working class flat, with its Japanese made electrical appliances, its shower in lieu of a bath-tub, and to create a fairly typical Hong Kong family preoccupied with the business of making a living by engaging in such typically Hong Kong activities as sewing sequins on sweaters and making plastic flowers. The total effect is endangered when the girl asks her nagging mother,

'What's the use of waiting a whole afternoon for one or two quid?'

One story centres on a Chinese couple, both university graduates, who have just come to Hong Kong. Their entire intellectual training is supposed to have been obtained in China. They are depicted as having no ability in the use of English. The student, in writing their dialogue, chooses to abandon the stilted conventionalized style of the traditional fictionized Chinaman, and adapts the idiom of sophisticated, equivalently-educated English-speaking persons. No effort is made to give literal translations of the way in which thoughts and feelings are expressed. This method is as much a convention as the other of using formal, stylized dialogue. But there are pitfalls. A quarrel between the husband and wife is one of the emotional climaxes in the story, and it seems peculiar that the writer should make it begin with the husband's verbal quibble, based on an English idiom, a comparison which is totally alien to Chinese persons unacquainted with the culture of the English-speaking world.[2]

'Why don't we slip off to church after I've finished my ironing?' she suggested.

'Why do we have to slip off? It's nothing criminal, going to church.... We should go, you know, being so poor.'

'Why?' She was beginning to raise her voice.

'Why, church mice, of course,' trying to be funny.

We have already stated that language varies according to situation. Situation includes a variety of factors, which include the age, sex, educational level, social status and geographical origin of the speakers. Of course, the same individual may have a number of different styles to suit the subject matter, the purpose of the communication, and so on. Also he may change his style according to the various social relationships existing between speaker and hearer during an act of communication. We have seen that in trying to produce the language which is situationally appropriate, the Hong Kong writer, writing in English, finds certain varieties more difficult to write than others. Possibly because of a certain uneasiness about a complete 'Westernization' of the dialogue of characters with a completely Chinese background, and reluctance to rely too heavily on the translation method, student writers tend to use direct speech less frequently in depicting such characters than in pieces involving characters with backgrounds similar to their own.

In a piece entitled Marriage, Hong Kong Style, the semi-literate, mercenary mother of the prospective bride is the central character. The whole piece depends on her changing attitude towards her daughter's future husband and in-laws during their first meeting. The writer is fully aware of the importance of conveying this through dialogue, but she cuts down her use of direct speech, using descriptive epithets instead to describe the woman's 'style' of discourse which moves from 'polite but cold' to 'cordial' to 'very warm', to 'positively gushing' as she gleans more and more evidence of their wealth.

Language also varies as a result of the speaker's being a member of a professional group. People of the same group use jargon or 'talk shop' when they speak to one another. As we have seen the central characters of many pieces which have been produced are university students, and our writers are often very successful in their use of the specialized language which reflects their membership in a university community. But they are much more handicapped in the reproduction of the specialized jargon of other groups such as lawyers, doctors, and fishermen. When these characters are introduced, their professions are incidental rather than essential to the plot.

In the case of lawyers, doctors, engineers and so on, our writers are possibly more hampered by a lack of technical knowledge about their respective fields than by the problem of reproducing their 'jargon' in English. The jargon of thieves, gangsters and other characters of the 'underworld' presents even greater difficulties. Most of our students are familiar with the 'jargon' of American mobsters because of the mass media. But their language seems to be so tied to their particular world that transferring it to a different world just does not seem to work. Somehow one finds it rather difficult to believe in a triad member in Hong Kong who speaks like Al Capone or the Godfather. The difficulty of presenting such characters convincingly may be one of the reasons for the rare appearance of gangsters in the pieces presented so far. One such piece, entitled Angry Young Man relies more heavily on narration than on dialogue. Where dialogue is introduced, it is stilted and 'hybrid', an unhappy mixture of a few American gangsterisms and what is basically language written according to the translation method.

> 'You lazy no-good son of a bitch. Why are you not at work? How many times do I have to tell you to stay away from booze and pot? Where do you think those damned things will lead you? You are throwing away your future....'

An effort is made to introduce some local colour, through reference to the jade ring worn by the boss of the gang, and to the 'dai dong' or gambling stall which is one source of 'big brother's' wealth. But the dialogue somehow lets the writer down.

> 'Get your filthy hands off me and beat it. After a life of endless toil, of meagreness, of strict morals, you can't even keep yourself, much less a woman.'

In interviews with our students we find that they feel they must come to some sort of resolution about the dialogue of characters on the fringe. How can they best suggest the 'jargon' of the underworld to English-speaking readers while at the same time preserving the 'spirit' of their language?

Then there is the--possibly even greater--problem presented by regional dialects. It is not only the regional dialects spoken, but attitudes to these dialects, which are important in the delineation of character. Writing about the English-speaking world, one could use Cockney, Brooklynese, or the fronter broad 'a' of the Bostonian for various purposes. There are many Chinese dialects, and, of course, many subjective reactions towards these within the Chinese community in Hong Kong. Dialect jokes and the use of dialect are commonplace in the various mass media. The problem confronting the creative writer writing in English is how best to convey Chinese dialectal variations in English. Should a Chinese peasant from the country be made to speak like a hillbilly from the Ozarks? If not, should the writer differentiate at all between the speech of the peasant and that of his city cousin, especially if the differing origins of the characters have a bearing on the work as a whole? The mind boggles at the immensity of the task. Most of our writers prefer not to deal with such situations at all, either because they realize the difficulty of making their characters credible, or because they are not interested in such situations anyway. The only student who has so far made any reference to dialects at all has to depend on the use of the omniscient point of view to let the readers know that a certain Cantonese woman did not like her daughter-in-law because she was a Hakka and therefore, in her view, a lazy good-for-nothing. The writer makes no attempt to differentiate between the language used by the Cantonese woman and her Hakka daughter-in-law. It would be virtually impossible to have Eliza Doolittles or Uncle Remuses among the characters created by our writers.

Reactions to the Creative Writing Course

We realize there is a great deal more to teaching writing than simply showing our students the accepted conventions of spelling, punctuation, word use, sentence construction, sequencing and paragraphing. It is difficult to assess the success or failure of our course. Some students have testified that they have found it much easier to express themselves creatively at the end of the course because of the imposed discipline. Many found they have benefited from the exchange of criticism and comments. A comparison of work done before the course with work done at the end of it invariably shows the work later has greater maturity. But, then, this type of comparison must take into account the natural development of the student. Still, many have said that their own involvement in writing creatively has made them more aware of the creative processes behind the great works to which they are exposed in their other courses. We understand that the work of the two students who have been awarded scholarships to spend some time at the Seawise University has compared favourably with that of their classmates whose native language is English. In the opinion of Internal Examiners and External Examiners based abroad, none of the students who have taken this option has failed the paper. None, however, has become a professional writer, though a few have turned their skills to advertising and the writing of promotional literature in English.

Before we conclude, we would like to quote one of our students who wrote,

> 'Here is a Chinese in western clothes. He is so silent. He cannot speak well in English. He does not speak well in Chinese. Is there nothing to say? Or is it because he cannot say anything in an interesting way? Perhaps it is simply because he has not got over the bar of language difficulty.'

Many other students and indeed numerous people in the community at large believe one result of attempting to learn both Chinese and English is that both are learned rather badly. Cantonese, sometimes laced with occasional English terms, is the usual medium of spoken communication among our students. However, there is a general feeling that the standard of written Chinese among our students is usually rather low. We have seen how the Cantonese-speaker may find written Chinese more difficult to master compared to his Mandarin-speaking counterpart. Furthermore, if he has received his secondary education largely in the medium of English, he would have had little practice writing in Chinese. On the other hand, his English, both spoken and written, is learned largely in a classroom situation, so that native fluency is rarely achieved.[3] On the whole, our creative writers may be said to have a rather good control over their written medium, in the sense they are able to write English relatively free from grammatical errors. But the kind of English

they are most used to is the English used in lectures and academic discussions, in essays and dissertations. While native speakers recognize and take for granted the immense diversity of English, the learner of English as a second language may not be aware that different varieties of English exist, and may not always be able to use it appropriately in different situations. Our creative writers must learn to use different styles to suit different characters and situations. Then also, they have to face the problem of writing about their own culture in an alien language. It is difficult enough to write creatively in one's own language, but when this is done in a foreign language, the problems are multiplied a hundredfold.

Yet, in spite of derogatory comments about the average Hong Kong student's lack of ability in both English and Chinese, some of our writers are also proficient in the use of written Chinese, and could, if they wished, write creatively in Chinese. In fact one or two have written poems and short pieces in Chinese, or have translated from English into Chinese, rather successfully. They have nevertheless accepted the challenge to write in a foreign language, partly to fulfill degree requirements, but also, we have been told, because they feel they may be able to allow non-Chinese people to have a glimpse of their thoughts and feelings, and may in fact be helping to interpret and explain their own culture to the west.

Finally, we would like to conclude by stating that our comments on the work produced so far are not intended to belittle the abilities or achievements of our creative writers. Far from it. We feel that they have set themselves a difficult task, and have acquitted themselves creditably.

FOOTNOTES

[1]See H. Kwok and M. Chan, 'Where The Twain Do Meet: A preliminary study of the language habits of university undergraduates in Hong Kong', General Linguistics, Pennsylvania University Press, Vol. 12, No. 2, pp. 63-82.

[2]Some English metaphors and comparisons are in fact paralleled in Chinese, and these can be more or less literally translated. See M. Chan and H. Kwok, 'Figuratively Speaking: A Study of The Cantonese-speaking Undergraduate's Response to Figures of Speech in Shakespeare', Shakespeare Quarterly, The Folger Shakespeare Library, Vol. XXV, Spring 1974 No. 2, pp. 209-227.

[3]There is no lack of literature on this subject including, for example, Eric Kvan's 'Problems of Bilingual Milieu in Hong Kong' in Hong Kong, a Society in Transition, ed. by I. C. Jarvie in Consultation with J. Agassi, London, 1969. Also, on the topic of language teaching and learning, there has been recently a spate of letters in the correspondence columns written by leading educationalists including those written by Arthur Hinton, Robert Lord, James Lowcock, the Education Acting Group, etc.